

Alcohol expense debate hangs over Council

By Brock Weir

Further details of what Councillors have spent and when are now available on the Town's website, following a decision last week to make more details available.

While the reporting for 2012 remains the same, the drive for further information has led to a greater breakdown in last year's numbers. Among the details was Mayor Dawe was reimbursed \$56 for alcohol purchases.

This information was released the day after the alcohol issue, and whether it should be an allowable expense, was at the focus of a heated Council debate. The issue has lingered over Council since late last year following a motion from Councillor Chris Ballard to ban the expense outright.

'It was nice to see that [in 2013] there were no reports of Council members spending anything on alcohol so, in my mind, this is a very simple motion to pass that just confirms what we engaged in the past year,' he said.

The matter, however, was not such a simple one to other members of Council.

'I don't find anything simple or innocuous about this,' said Councillor Evelyn Buck to the motion. 'When Councillor Ballard readily acknowledges there has been no alcohol expense, why would we choose to put forward such an amendment? I know the answer to that and I think we all know the answer to that. There is a question of your own responsibilities.'

She went on to say that the motion would be tying the hands of the individuals in question. If the Mayor, as 'the good will ambassador of Aurora, the host of the community, the chief sales person for the Town of Aurora' was in a situation of offering hospitality to someone, no one would give it a second thought and allow the office-holder to exercise his or her judgement, she said.

'The idea that we would put this amendment in the resolution is absolutely abhorrent if not disgusting,' she concluded.

Councillor Ballard made his motion as an amendment to the wider-ranging issue on the table, which was to report Councillors' expenses twice yearly on the Town's website. His motion failed 6 ? 3, garnering further support only from Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo.

That wasn't the end of the discussion, however, and was brought back on the floor by Councillor John Abel who demanded answers from Councillor Ballard. Throughout the debate, Councillor Ballard said he had documentation which proved that contrary to other arguments made around the table that a member of Council had indeed expensed alcohol in the previous full calendar year. That documentation, however, was not readily put forward.

'It is not fair to make false accusations,' said Councillor Abel. 'Anyone can accuse anyone of anything. I don't think that Councillor Ballard appreciates the effects of unproven accusations. He said he would have proof and there is none before us. There is no evidence of what he is saying and I think one should think soberly before blasting off with wild charges against his fellow Councillors.'

When Councillor Abel, however, suggested Councillor Ballard was 'trying to make a name for himself', the person at the receiving end called a Point of Order claiming the comments were disparaging.

'If the Councillor would like sabres at dawn to defend the good honour of his fellow Council members, I am sure that can be arranged' he said, before Mayor Dawe decided against his point of privilege and ultimately challenging the chair. 'I stand by what I said before. I have the documentation that was provided to me by staff, receipts, expenses, copies of bills, not large amounts of money, but I have never made this a huge issue until it was pushed into a corner.'

He was asked by Council to come back with the documentation in two weeks. Speaking after the meeting, Councillor Ballard said when the documentation is provided, certain Councillors who had 'rushed to defend' the issue would be left with 'egg on their face', but the expense reports were released on the Town's website shortly thereafter.

When asked why he didn't just speak up during the many debates surrounding this issue, rather than allow it to continue, Mayor Dawe responded, 'Why didn't anybody ask me?'

'No one asked me,' he said. 'All there was was accusations of wrongdoing. Those who are interested could have saved hours of time simply by asking. If someone was truly interested in working collaboratively and moving to a better place in the Town you work with people and you ask as opposed to accuse and bully.'

Explaining the expense, Mayor Dawe said he donated two rounds of golf to charity events, as he does every summer. People bid on them and after the matches, he took the winning bidders out to lunch.

'Much ado about nothing,' said Councillor Abel when asked about the numbers. 'I think [the debate] is continuing to try to paint this Council in a bad light. I think we will try to move forward with positive things that concern the Town.'

When asked about having any eggs on his face, he said he 'knows who is throwing the eggs', but admitted he might have handled the situation differently if he was in the Mayor's shoes.